Hindrances

TO

Union with the Church:

A LETTER

TO AN AGED FRIEND.

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Rev. William C. White, D. D.

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REV. B. M. PALMER, D. D.

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VENERABLE AND DEAR SIR:—It is long since a case has so profoundly interested me as your own. An old man soon to be "gathered to his fathers," venerable alike for his virtue as for his years, standing as you do at the threshold of the Christian church, and gazing upon the mysteries of religious experience hidden within its veil, and yet distrusting his own fitness to enter within the shadows of the temple; if there be an object on earth to fix the gaze of angels in heaven, it must be this.

Believing in my conscience that you will ere long be gathered into the general assembly of the redeemed above, I would rejoice to see you first admitted into the church below; and if I could be allowed of God to speak a single word to break the spell which has hitherto rested upon your de-

cision, I would accept it as one of the sweetest privileges of my life. It would be to you a happy crown placed upon an honorable and useful career, to leave this personal testimony to the riches of redeeming grace as the last act which you perform on earth. One of the charms of old age, when we have entirely put aside all the activities of life, is that the dew of our youth comes back to us. The unambitious simplicity of childhood is resumed; and the hard selfishness which we contract in the stir and bustle of our business years is displaced; at the last as at the first, we live only to love, combining with the mellowness of age the sweet docility and gentleness of youth. You know not how attractive you are to me; nor how the moisture gathers in my eye as I look upon the beauty of a serene old age, crowned with every human virtue, and only needing to be encircled with the halo of religion.

As I understand your case it is about this: You accept as absolutely true all the statements of the Bible as to the ruin of man by sin. You believe that Jesus Christ came from his Father to be our Saviour? You are assured that his redemption is complete, and the salvation perfect which he has accomplished. You have not a doubt of the Divine sincerity in all the offers of

pardon and eternal life which are made to sinners. You are entirely persuaded that whosoever believes in Christ will be saved. Nay, you can say even more; that in all the aspects of his person and his work, Jesus Christ appears to you "*lovely*" and precious; and you cannot reflect seriously upon all that he has done for a lost world without an out-going of the heart in trust and love. But your trouble is, that you can fix upon no definite period in your life when these thoughts and feelings first arose. They have been so habitual and constant through a long life, that you cannot recognize an epoch of *change*, and say of it, this is now the dividing line in my life, the equator that separates its two hemispheres. You have accustomed yourself to *think*, and perhaps, have so gathered it from religious teachers, that the new birth and conversion must be accompanied, in every case, with something of a jar, which will attest the fact to consciousness. It is, then, to this point I will address myself, in the hope, possibly, of relieving your scruples.

In the first place, I call your attention to the fact that the Bible nowhere emphasizes either the *time* or the *mode* of our conversion as things of any importance. It states very clearly our condition as sinners before God, and tells what we must be-

come in order that we may be saved. It is abundantly full as to the *necessity* and *nature* of the change which must be wrought; but it is entirely silent about the importance of knowing the time of its occurrence, or of comprehending the manner of its accomplishment. It sets before us the terms of salvation, the state into which we must be brought, and the particular tests by which we are to judge of it. These are the important facts with which we are to deal, and not with the method or the period of the transition. If this were material to the issue, without which we could not ascertain the reality of the change itself, would the Scriptures be so profoundly silent about it? The great question is *whether* we are converted, not *when*; *whether* we are born again, not *how*. It is the absolute fact itself with which we are concerned, whether or not the change has taken place—not the moment *in* which, nor the manner *by* which it occurred; and for determining that, proper and sufficient tests are afforded.

In the second place, the Holy Ghost, who is the author of the new birth, is a free and sovereign Spirit, and chooses his own avenue by which to enter the human soul. The gospel is intended for all mankind, with all their adversities of temperament and character, in all the varieties of

condition and providential allotment in which they are placed. Some are constitutionally phlegmatic, others are mercurial and lively; some are melancholy and full of tears and sighs; others are cheerful and gay, full of laughter and song. Shall we shut up the Holy Spirit to deal with all these precisely alike? While the substantive change is the same in all, will not the form of its manifestation and the mode of development be different in each? While the philosopher must be renewed equally with the serf that ploughs his field, must the Holy Ghost disregard the knowledge of the one and the ignorance of the other?—or shall He wisely avail himself of the peculiar aptitudes of each in selecting the path by which he will come to both?

To put the thought a little differently: In one case the Holy Ghost may choose to enter the door of the *understanding* and to impress truth powerfully as truth upon the soul, and the predominant cast of that man's experience will be *intellectual.* These truths, too, may steal in by degrees, and so softly as scarcely to be recognized; and they may silently and slowly deepen upon the soul until they have become interwoven into the whole of a man's being, and he is revolutionized, without knowing when nor how it was

done. In another case, the Holy Spirit may fasten down upon the *conscience* such a sense of right and duty as to control the will; and experimental religion will be reflected upon the world under the aspect of stern *principle*. The development, too, will, in all probability, be as gradual and as quiet as in the other, because religion, as a principle, has been long striking down its roots into the character; and the man may find it difficult to distinguish between his "religion and his morality," so as to tell when and where the one began and the other ceased. In still another case the Holy Ghost may enter the soul through the *sympathies and affections*, and the cast of the experience will be *emotional*. And here, again, the work may be quiet and gentle, or it may be stormy and rough; and what difference does it make, if only the transformation be real? Thus it is we have all those varieties of Christian experience and character with which the church is diversified, and which so attentive an observer as yourself has often noted. "There are diversities of operation," says Paul, "but it is the same God which worketh all in all" (1 Corinthians xii. 6); and, of course, in this diversity of operation, there will be a corresponding diversity in the mode of external manifestation. A beautiful illustration

of the different methods by which men are brought to Christ is furnished in the sixteenth chapter of Acts; and it has always seemed to me that there was a hidden design in placing side by side, in the same chapter, the conversion of Lydia and that of the jailer. I know nothing better to correct the error of those who limit the sovereignty of God's free Spirit, and who undertake to shape all human experience in one mould. There is Lydia, of whom it is only said (vs. 14) "whose heart the Lord opened," while the jailer was subdued (vs. 26–33) amidst all the terrors of the earthquake. Do you not suppose the discovery of the change was very different to the two respectively? Your case is far more like that of Lydia than of the jailer. You can draw a man-of-war with a twine, but it will be with so equable and gentle a strain that the motion at any one instant is scarcely perceived; it certainly would not answer to do it with a jerk.

In the third place, the time and place and mode of conversion can be recognized only when the change is accompanied by a sharp contrast in our emotions. Sometimes a sinner is overtaken, in his course of impenitence and sin, with sudden and powerful convictions. He is struck to the earth, like Paul on his journey to Damas-

cus. He has great distress and pungent convictions. The translation is just as quick out of this into a state of peace and joy. Of course, there are two sets of feelings, placed over against each other, in open antagonism, and it is the vividness of this contrast (which is only an incident of the change, and not the change itself) that causes him to mark the transition. Unfortunately, this is too frequently presented as the exact type of a sound conversion, after which every case has to be fashioned; whereas, this ought rather to be the exceptional type, and not the normal. In those instances when youth have been trained up in the bosom of the church, and divine truth has been brought to bear in shaping the character as well as the life, we would rather expect no such violent contrasts as I have indicated above; but that a Christian hope would dawn upon the soul as the day dawns upon the world. Doubtless many young persons who have been "brought up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord," are restrained from making an open profession of their faith, because they recognize no violent shock in their religious experience and can trace no vivid contrasts in their feelings. Should any such read this little tract, they are affectionately entreated to weigh its counsels as

equally applicable to them as to the venerable friend to whom they were first addressed. Take your own case as an illustration. For these many years you have been under the influence of religious feeling. Divine truth has been soaking into you, silently it may be, but yet really like the soft rain or the still softer dew. Religious feeling has been there all the time, drifting and changing into a thousand different forms; but always shading from one to another, like the colors of the rainbow, so as to escape detection. There have been no contrasts, as when you put the yellow by the red, and thus you have not marked the transition.

I do not wish to be misunderstood on this point. I do not mean to say that the *real* change which occurs in regeneration is not instantaneous. On the contrary, in every instance, it is so. There is no middle term between death and life, and the passage from one to the other is always necessarily instantaneous; but what is true of the *real* change may not always hold as to the *apparent* change. The sun actually rises, and throws his beams above the horizon before his disc appears to the eye.

And now, my venerable father, I come to the pith of the difficulty, where I expect you to find the solution of your trouble. We must allow our-

selves to distinguish between a state of grace and the evidence of that state. They do not perfectly coincide. The one may exist when the other is withheld. What, for example, are we to make of those seasons of spiritual darkness in which the holiest Christians are sometimes involved? You cannot read the Psalms of David without perceiving that he passed through seasons of darkness, when, from the hidings of God's face, he had no present evidence of his acceptance before him; and there is not a saint on earth, nor in heaven, who cannot recall some bitter moments when the terrors of the law took hold of them, just as before conversion. Shall we say of them that, while deprived of comfort and joy, they cease to be God's children, and have fallen back into their old, unregenerate state? No! no! for in these very moments they hate sin, and mourn over its presence and power, and thus give the surest proof of spiritual life. It was at the very moment, and in the very act of our Lord's sublime obedience to His Father's will, that He cried, "My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" The simple truth is, that we are in a state of grace, when, very often, the comfortable persuasion and knowledge of it are temporarily withdrawn.

John Owen quaintly observes that in the winter

a tree appears to be dead, but only because the life has gone down into the roots beneath the ground. The tree is growing still, but out of sight. The roots are stretching deeper, taking firmer hold upon the soil, drawing up more of the fatness of the earth, in order that the branches may spread wider, and the trunk lift its stately column higher in the air above. By and by, when the spring comes, the life will flow upward with the sap beneath the bark, and cover the tree again with foliage and fruit. So there are winter seasons with the Christian, when the leaf and the flowers disappear; this spiritual life is nourishing the hidden graces of humility and penitence in the depths of the soul. He comes to profounder views of the malignity of sin and of the deceitfulness of his own heart, and feels more intensely his need of a Divine Redeemer. He is growing under ground at the very time he is doubting whether he is a Christian at all.

You perceive, then, the distinction at which I aim: That we may be soundly converted to God, and yet, for a longer or shorter time the evidence of the fact may not be supplied so as to bring comfort to the heart. In probably a large majority of cases we are wholly mistaken as to the time when the change actually occurred. We

confound the *apparent* with the *real* change. We take the discovery of grace as in the first joy of a new hope, for the actual inworking of that grace itself; putting the *manifestation* of the change for the *production* of the change. It is a mistake of the same kind as if a man should say at twelve o'clock in the day, the sun has just risen, when, in fact, he has just burst through the fog and mist which obscured his beams.

In my judgment you have been a child of God these many years; and had you died at any moment you would have gone to heaven. But misapprehensions of one sort or other settled down upon you like a great fog-bank, and hid the discovery of it from you. It is not a pleasant nor a good state to be in; and hence my desire to bring you out from beneath the cloud which has thrown its dark shadow upon all your hopes and joys.

But I am growing tedious. Let me say then, fourthly, that the Scriptures furnish us the tests by which to determine whether we are "born again." There is but *one* question before you. "Has the Holy Spirit quickened me into spiritual life?" It does not matter much when nor how he did it; whether forty years ago or only yesterday. Now, how is the presence of the spiritual life to be detected? I answer, very much as in

natural life. The first thing a new-born infant does is to breathe. The breath is the sign and evidence of the life that pre-existed. So it is just as natural for the Christian that he should *believe*, that is to say, that he should rest upon Christ in humble and confiding trust. Are you not conscious of such a trust in your own case? Then again, there is *love;* not a selfish desire to coax the Almighty to confer certain benefits, but an honest and spontaneous affection for him, just because he is the Being that he is. Can you not say that you love God simply because he is so holy, and so just, and so glorious that "he cannot look upon sin with allowance?" A phase of this love is gratitude to the Lord Jesus Christ for his work of redemption. "We love him because he first loved us." Is this your experience? Then the modification of this love as directed to the pious and the good. If a stranger were introduced to you, with the simple announcement that he was an eminently pious man, would there not be an instinctive and secret and half-realized knitting of your heart to him precisely on that basis? Then there is *repentance;* not the slavish dread of the punishment of sin, but an ingenuous hatred of the thing itself, because it grieves God; just as a good child, who is too old to be punished, feels

a greater pain in having wounded a tender parent by disobedience. Can you not apply this test, and pronounce favorably upon yourself? If we discover these fruits of the divine life within us, why then the principle and power of that life are shown, and we are warranted in the conclusion that we are born of God.

But, my venerable friend, there is a much shorter cut out of this thicket. I have written all that goes before only to put you on a line of reflection that may counteract the prevailing impressions which have hitherto restrained you from a public profession of religion. After all, there is no great necessity for all this weighing and balancing of our feelings. Let the past go for what it is worth. It is the past, any how, and you cannot bring it back to tinker at it, or mend it in a single particular. Let it drift away, then, into the vast eternity, to which it belongs, and bear its own record, which you cannot change. It makes little difference what you were twenty years ago; what are you now? and what do you propose to do through the small remainder of your life on earth? Just *reflect* that you are a poor, lost sinner, just like me, and that immediately before you stands a complete and willing Saviour, with outstretched arms, and saying, "Come unto me and

live." What have you to do with doubts, or fears, or difficulties, or misgivings, or questionings of any sort? Throw all these back upon God, to whom they properly belong, and consider only the attitude and the call of Christ, and your privilege, as well as duty, in the premises. All that you have to do is to lay hold of Christ's hand, as did Peter when sinking in the sea. No matter about light or comfort, or things of that class. These will take care of themselves, and will fall behind you like your own shadow. You have no concern with anything but Christ, and your only work is to trust in him. Experimental religion is wonderfully simple; it is just being a child. See how the Master represents it in the Gospel of Matthew chapter xviii., verses: 2-4 "And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever, therefore, shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Whether this childlike repose on him be followed with rapture or not, just rest upon the Saviour's bosom, and leave everything in his hands—and then go before the world and tell them that is your hope. Join

yourself to the Redeemer's church; unite yourself with the great company of those who are not relying upon this or that vivid experience, but upon the Saviour's call, and upon the Saviour's cross alone.

You know that people who think least about their happiness are the most likely to obtain it. She is a coy maiden, very much like our own shadow, which we can only manage by walking away from it. In religious experience it is equally true that our shifting frames of feeling are but the reflection of our own state and condition, and can be modified and controlled only by attending to this.

I must ask your pardon for the length of this communication, as well as for the freedom with which I have addressed you I have not at all forgotten that in years and experience I am but a child to you, nor has it been a want of veneration that has inspired this boldness; but as I would not hesitate a moment in receiving you into the church, I greatly desire you should take that step without delay.

I cannot believe that God's Spirit has led you along tenderly and tremblingly these many years to leave his work unfinished at the last. Perhaps he means that my feeble hand shall guide your

tottering steps along out of the darkness which has obscured you into the true, clear light of Christian hope and peace. May God grant it! But, oh, do not let your long and virtuous life close on earth before you nail your testimony for Jesus upon the gate of his sanctuary.

With profound esteem and veneration, as well as with Christian love, I remain,

Dear sir, yours most truly,

B. M. PALMER.